

IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

'Swinger' saves cost of answering machine

For small businesses that depend on incoming WATS lines, or toll-free 800 numbers, for orders, here are three problems that can be solved by using a nifty device called the "Swinger":

✓ **Problem 1.** You have one order taker and two telephone lines to handle incoming orders. One of the telephone lines is an incoming WATS line, and the other is a local number. When the order taker is on one line, you want the other to go to an answering machine. In this way the order taker won't be distracted by the other ringing phone, and your customers will be able



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to leave messages instead of getting ignored or put on hold. This problem is easily solved by businesses without WATS lines by having one line "roll over" to the second when the first is busy, and by putting an answering machine on the second line. However, WATS lines can't be rolled over. How can you accomplish the same thing for your WATS line, without fiddling with two answering machines?

Solution: By connecting both incoming lines to the Swinger, whenever the order taker is on one line, the other line is automatically directed to the answering machine.

✓ **Problem 2.** You can't afford to have an order taker on duty during the evenings or on weekends, but you don't want to ignore any potential customers. In this case, let's say you have three incoming lines that you want answered by an answering machine so your potential customers could leave messages. How can you do this without having three answering machines?

Solution: Use the Swinger to direct all three lines to a single answering machine. When the answering machine is in use, the caller receives a busy signal rather than no response. Since most people will try to call back after getting a busy signal, the call is not lost, and a message can be taken.

✓ **Problem 3.** Most businesses that use answering machines use the type that allows messages to

be retrieved by dialing your own telephone number from another line and touching secret access codes on the telephone number pad. In this way, the answering machine itself can be hidden (usually in a switching room or in an out-of-the-way closet), and the of-

fice is not disturbed by the various clicking noises such machines make. The problem is, if you can't dial your 800 number (since such numbers can only be accessed by someone outside your own calling area), how can you call your machine to retrieve your messages?

Solution: Use the Swinger. Since it can be used to direct both local and incoming WATS calls to the same answering machine, you can simply dial your own local number to access the machine.

This impressive device is tiny, only about 6 inches by 6 inches by 2 inches, and is manufactured by Skutch Electronics of Roseville, Calif. It is available locally from Electronic Devices Inc. for about \$165.

After using the device for several months, I found just two shortcomings. First, it has a switch that lets you set the device for "attended" or "unattended" operation. When your order taker is on duty, as in Problem 1 above, you want the attended setting. When he or she is not on duty, as in Problem 2, you want the unattended setting. Naturally, if someone forgets to flip the switch one morning and one night, nothing works as expected.

Second, installation is complicated, and only certain types of answering machines will operate with the Swinger. It's absolutely necessary to have an expert installer do it for you.

Is it worth the expense and effort to install a Swinger? If all three problems described above can be solved in your office, the answer is clearly yes, even if you have to purchase a new answering machine as well.

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